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# Self-Confessions

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**SELF-CONFESSIONS**

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts, English

By

Brandy Clark

May 2017

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## **SELF-CONFESSIONS**

English

Missouri State University, May 2017

Master of Arts

Brandy Clark

## **ABSTRACT**

The poems in this collection pay homage to the narrative tradition of poetry, in that they tell a story, use a narrator and characters. These poems, however, are the author's own interpretation of the narrative tradition. The poems are not formal, are not written in metered verse, and do not rhyme. The poems in this collection are a celebration of narrative poetry, and of her poetic voice. They are a mixture of free verse and prose poems, and above all—they collectively tell a story: her story.

**KEYWORDS:** narrative poetry, narrative tradition, poetic voice, story, free verse, prose poems

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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Marcus Cafagna  
Chairperson, Advisory Committee  
Missouri State University

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By

Brandy Clark

A Masters Thesis  
Submitted to the Graduate College  
Of Missouri State University  
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Approved:

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Marcus Cafagna, Professor, English

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Sara Burge, Senior Instructor, English

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Julie Masterson, Dean, Graduate College

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Last, but not least, I would like to thank the following magazines for publishing the poems included in this thesis in some form or fashion: *The Camel Saloon*, for publishing "Ribbons & Pearls" and "Last Mug"; *Dead Snakes*, for publishing "Obituary", *BareBack Literary Magazine*, for publishing "Powerball", and *STRAPPEDzine*, for publishing "Homebody". Thank you for taking a chance on my work.

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## TELLING STORIES

Poetry came into my life at a very young age, through the work of Shel Silverstein's *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. My favorite poem out of the collection was "No Difference", where Silverstein speaks of everyone being the same size "when we turn off the light" (4). The last stanza ends with a solution to the problems of people discriminating against each other because of differences: "So maybe the way / To make everything right / Is for God to just reach out / And turn off the light!" (13-16). While I was too young to understand the subtle, grown-up nuances of *solutions to discrimination* in the poem, I understood the story of this narrative poem: the poem spoke to me on an understandable, mature level, and was about how deep down, every person in the world was the same. I was discriminated against at school, in a sense, by my peers. I was deemed different, all because I was shy and liked school. Silverstein's poems proved to be an escape, of sorts, for me. His poems were something I could read, and enjoy. His poems made me forget about the world for a while.

Poetry, as I got older, seemed to lose the subtle nuances that Silverstein used and became more of a stilted, almost elitist kind of language. In middle school, I was introduced not only to Shakespearean sonnets, but also to the Romantic poets via my English teacher: George Gordon (Lord Byron) and Percy Bysshe Shelley, in particular. While I enjoyed their use of language, their use of rhyme, and their capturing of feelings and the sublime, I thought that poetry was language only meant to be read and understood by the elite, that poetry always had to be fanciful and accessible only to a chosen few readers. Poetry turned into a secret of sorts, a code that I could not understand. It wasn't until high school that poetry became accessible to me again, via the work of Robert Frost.



Frost's poems were full of conversational language. "Good fences make good neighbors" (27, 45) was a line that stuck out to me. Reading Frost's poetry inspired me to pick up a pen, touch it to notebook paper, and write my first poem.

While I do not remember the content of that first poem I wrote, I remember that it was about something in my life, something familiar to me. Although I am drawn to poems that tell stories, I always found it difficult to stick to the "true" definition of narrative poetry—a definition I will delve into later on in this critical introduction—and found it much easier to write about events in my life, things about myself, and my family. When I entered college, I learned about free verse poetry and poetic voice. I learned that poetry did not have to rhyme, and that I could interject more of my own voice into my poems. That is when I felt truly liberated. Narrative poetry did not have to resort to stilted, archaic language. It did not have to be formal, and it did not have to rhyme. The poems in this collection are a celebration of my own version of the narrative tradition, and of my poetic voice. They are a mixture of free verse and prose poems, and above all—they tell a story: my story.

The definition of narrative poetry is one I came across not long after I entered high school, in my freshman English course. Narrative poetry has long been used as a means of expression, in terms of the oral tradition. The oral tradition, as defined by David C. Rubin, relies on "human memory for storage and oral/aural means for transmission" (3). Oral traditions "change little over long periods, though they do change from telling to telling" (3). In other words, the oral tradition relies on verbal communication, as well as listening skills, and includes tales that have been passed down from generation to

generation. This was a basic sort of definition for me. I recently discovered a more detailed definition of narrative poetry:

a form of poetry that tells a story, often making uses of the voices of a narrator and characters as well; the entire story is usually written in metered verse. Narrative poems do not have to follow rhythmic patterns. The poems that make this genre may be short or long, and the story it relates to may be complex. It is normally dramatic, with objectives, diverse character, and metre. (Meyer 2134)

The parts I focused on in this definition are “a form of poetry that tells a story” and “narrative poems do not have to follow rhythmic patterns”. I have never been a fan of the old styles of narrative poetry: poems written in “metered verse” and in which the story is “complex”. For example, Homer’s *The Illiad*, about the battle of Troy, is a book length epic poem that is a story; however, it is divided into twenty-four parts and is hard for me to grasp and understand.

Instead, a major influence on my work is Robert Frost. When I tell people this, sometimes I get strange looks, or the ever-popular question: “Really?” Frost’s style of work differs greatly from mine: he often writes about nature, and he stands at an odd place in the poetic tradition. When I speak of “odd”, what I mean is that he uses traditional poetic forms often found in works of the nineteenth century, and speaks of nature and the sublime. A good example of this is Frost’s “To The Thawing Wind,” which is a poetic ode close to the fifteen lines of a sonnet, written in metered, rhyming verse, and an homage to nature:

“Come with rain, O loud Southwester!  
Bring the singer, bring the nester;  
Give the buried flower a dream;  
Make the settled snowbank steam;  
Find the brown beneath the white;  
But whate’er you do tonight,  
Bathe my window, make it flow,  
Melt it as the ice will go;

Melt the glass and leave the sticks  
Like a hermit's crucifix;  
Burst into my narrow stall;  
Swing the picture on the wall;  
Run the rattling pages o'er;  
Scatter poems on the floor;  
Turn the poet out of door". (1-15)

Frost likes to write in metered verse, and uses a lot of diverse characters and colloquialisms. The poems in my collection do not focus on what Frost often liked to write about: nature (and man's state of being in the context of nature), and the rural community. None of the poems use any kind of formal poetic form. Any reader of this collection of my work might wonder whether the influence of Frost is even evident. Frost's influence on me lies not only in the language he used in his poems—the conversational, “plain-speak” language—but also in his philosophy of poetry, which has always aligned with my own. In his essay “The Figure a Poem Makes”, he says “it should be of the pleasure of the poem itself to tell how it can” (11). It took me a long time, and many years, to figure out what he meant by this statement. It is my habit, at first, to read things literally, and then figuratively. Once I figured the meaning out, it became clear to me. I believe what Frost meant in this particular statement is to not worry *too* much about whether poetry follows any specific forms, verse style, or conventions, and to let poems tell themselves “how [they] can”. I believe Frost's statement has a lot to do not only with the story, the subjects, the setting and the characters, but also with the writing style. While there are particular elements I pay attention to in the language of my poems, such as alliteration and assonance, I do not focus too much on line breaks, structure, or rhyme. Once my pen touches the paper, I write. I let the line breaks happen naturally. I let the story come out naturally. I let the structure of the poem I am writing happen naturally. To

me, this is what Frost meant by “it should be the pleasure of the poem itself to tell how it can”: let everything happen as it comes to you, and do not be so shackled by the structures of old narrative tradition. While a few of the poems in my collection,--for example, “Saturn can float in a bathtub”--are close to the fourteen lines in a Shakespearean sonnet and tell a story through structured verse, those poems do not follow the traditional iambic pentameter found in those sonnets, and do not follow the sonnet or narrative tradition too closely.

While I figured out my philosophy of poetry very early on in my writing career, it took me some time to find my writing voice. I have read many contemporary American poets over the years, such as Sharon Olds, Mark Jarman, Kim Addonizio, Tony Hoagland, Philip Levine, and Bob Hicok. Their poetry trends toward topics such as religion (in the case of Mark Jarman and his book *Unholy Sonnets*), and the working class (in the case of Philip Levine). All of their poetry tells stories and talks about popular culture (Bob Hicok), contemporary American culture (Tony Hoagland), and women living out the events of their daily lives (Sharon Olds and Kim Addonizio). My exposure to these poets influenced me to write about all of these subjects. There were times, however, when I held back. I thought that the people who read my poems would not want to hear the truths about me, or about my life. I was unhappy with the subjects of my poems and of the quality of my work. For this reason, I took a long hiatus from writing poetry—though I still read poetry from time to time. As I grew older, I found that I had a lot more life experiences to write about. I had also reached a point in my life where I found that to be a writer, I needed to be honest about such experiences, and about my

voice. I needed to let people read about the most intimate moments in my life, and the most embarrassing moments. I needed to confess myself, in a sense, to people.

My re-entry into the world of writing poetry came when I entered graduate school about seven years after graduating with my bachelor's degree from Missouri State University. It took me some time to find a contemporary poetic influence, and as I scoured through a lot of the poets I used to read in the past, I found a contemporary American poet that spoke to me on many levels. The particular poet I speak of is Frank Giampietro. I was not even searching for his work when his name entered my purview; I was searching for poetry magazines to submit my work to. Two of his poems appeared in one of the magazines, and when I read those two poems, I immediately identified with his work. His poetry showed me that poems could be written about subjects in my life that I did not know could be explored, such as in-depth explorations into popular culture and thoughts on the random aspects of life. For example, his poem "Procrastination" is one sentence asking a random question about a future poem he wants to write:

*When will I write that poem called *Meditation While Scraping the Dried Human Feces from the Bottom of My Son's New Shoe the Day After He Stepped in it in the Family Bathroom at Home Depot While I Was There to Price Wood for my New Backyard Writing Studio* ? (Gulf Stream Online #3)*

I have never seen a poem consisting of one sentence before, let alone a poem contemplating on the title of the poem he "wanted" to write about. The subject of this poem is so absurd, and delightfully random, that I connected to it immediately. This poem showed me that even the most random of thoughts could be made into a poem.

Not long after I discovered his work, I bought Giampietro's first book, *Begin Anywhere*. This book, published in 2008, showcases more of his influence on me and my poetry. The poems in his book are a mixture of short poems and long poems, but they are

written in relatable language and are as concise as possible. I used to write lengthy poems that spanned the course of almost three pages, and Giampietro showed me that a poem did not have to be three pages long, as long as *your* poetic voice was evident throughout, and as long as you were true to either yourself or the subject you were writing about. The subjects that Giampietro likes to write about mirror what I like to write about. According to Julianna Baggott, in a review on the back cover of *Begin Anywhere*, the subject of Giampietro's poems consist of:

the woe of commercialism, the heartbreak of suburbia, and the exquisite complexities of family. Within his breakneck hilarity, there is always some nod toward our own fleshy mortality, a small sigh of death. Giampietro's unique blend of genius makes the world more glorious, uproarious, and lonesomely true.

I have drawn on experiences from my life, as I find these experiences the easiest to write about, and my experiences range from my commentary on popular culture, to family situations, to questions about the literal meaning of religion. A common and general subject in my poems is my reaction to what is considered "popular" in American culture. The poem "My life is measured out in" is one inspired by "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". T.S. Eliot speaks of women coming and going, and "talking of Michelangelo". To me, this poem is a snapshot of repetitiveness in one moment, in one place. The first line of the poem, "My life is measured out with coffee spoons" inspired the first line of my poem, "My life is measured out in", where I speak about certain known elements in popular culture, and about the constants and repetition of events in my life: "My life is measured out in...episodes of Supernatural and Doctor Who, and learning to salt the bones and that time is wibbly wobbly / the queue on my Netflix, full of movies I have yet to watch".

Another subject I write about in my poems is my literal response to the abstractness of religion—more specifically, the religion I was brought up in, Baptist/Christianity. In one poem, “Churches,” when I talked about driving to Kansas City, I wondered why Missouri needs so many churches: “churches sat alongside the road, churches one after another, / *you will find Jesus here* / and I wonder if I took / a detour, pulled into the parking lot and walked inside / if I would truly find Jesus there, / sitting in the uncomfortable pews”. When I was younger, I followed religion blindly, but as I grew older and more disillusioned with the idea of organized religion, I found myself wondering about the literal meaning of such phrases as *you’ll find Jesus here* and *you’ll be new* when you are baptized again.

A commonality among all of my poems is that they tell stories. My narrative poetry tells stories, with the use of a narrator, and while the point of view in these poems is largely first person (“Goals” is one of the few poems in this collection that uses the second person point of view), all of the poems tell stories and use myself as the main narrator. Narrative poetry also uses characters, and the characters in these poems are either herself, members of my family, or other people I encounter in my daily life. One such poem, “Powerball”, talks about my mother’s incessant need to keep buying Powerball tickets: “she keeps digging / up quarters, enough to get the two dollars / to buy a ticket, enough to be disappointed / again when the numbers don’t match”. The overarching subject of this creative thesis seems to be commentary on daily life, and the people, or things, I encounter. In the poem “Coffee”, I talk about sharing coffee with someone, and even though we are close in distance, we are far apart in regards to our

relationship: “Words between us have always been verbal illusions, / erased letters and syllables we try to grasp at / before they vanish”.

This creative thesis is not the end of my poetry writing career. Whether I publish poems in major magazines or only in online magazine, or whether I publish a small book of poems or a chapbook, I will continue to hone my craft. I will continue to further develop my poetic voice, and I will continue to tell my story, to anyone willing to listen.



## Goals

*Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans* is something Lennon probably borrowed from Reader's Digest, something scribbled on his calendar in between reminders to go to Abbey Road or do yoga and be one with the universe and meditate. If you choose to make no plans, you'll become stagnant and stay in one place while everyone else talks about living life, loving life, getting married, having kids and suggesting you talk to a therapist about your supposed lack of motivation. If life is supposed to happen, you'll wonder, how will you aware of it? Will life sneak up behind you and tap your shoulder, or will it wave its arms in front of your face, like a frantic child, lost and screaming and trying to get your attention? If you don't wish to think about the meaning behind the statement, just take it to mean don't pencil in every moment of your day and wake up an hour earlier than usual to watch the sun rise from the back porch deck. No harm in being a little cliché, no harm in leaving confused friends waiting on your front porch as you walk by, give them a wave, and do your *other plans* while pretending you and your friends are better off as strangers.

--after Carl Dennis

## Coffee

Sitting across the table from one another,  
silent as we stir sugar into coffee. Spoon  
clinks against porcelain, sugar dissolves  
into the liquid much like the few words  
spoken between us dissolve into nothing,  
syllables melding into caffeinated vapor.  
Words between us have always been verbal illusions,  
erased letters and syllables we try to grasp at  
before they vanish. If conversation revealed anything new  
it would taste as bitter as the first few swallows,  
and instead, we curl our fingers around  
our mugs, let the warmth seep into our skin.  
Steam curls into the air, and I want to grab  
at its shapelessness, solidify it, hold on to it  
and to you, and I wonder why keep your hand  
clasped in mine, why I refuse to let go,  
but if I did, how long would it take you to fall?

## Ribbons & Pearls

Whispers, snarls, cussing. *Who the hell does he think he is?* two elderly women spat out as they passed me, not bothering to keep their voice at polite levels. I slowed in my walk down the aisle of the store to see a man, a purse slung over one arm, a purposeful stride carrying him through the women's clothing section. He wore red lipstick applied with the greatest of care, white pearls, that clung to his neck like a decorative rope, and a towering teased-up bouffant, dried hairspray clinging to every strand of hair. The man, now picking through the gaudy ten-dollar blouses hanging on the racks, harbored less confidence than he'd shown moments before. He cleared his throat, adjusted his purse, leaned down to tug at the ecru pantyhose clinging to his calves. I must admit, he had nice legs. Our town, situated along the notches of the Bible Belt, harbored expectations no one could ever hope to reach and did not appreciate people unwilling to fit into unspoken ideals. His ideals meant selecting bright and colorful outfits, painting his fingernails a shade to match his lipstick. Fingers: long, slender, not meant to do a man's work, played with the pearls encircling his neck. He must have felt someone staring, so he looked in my direction. I nodded, smiled, gave him a quick *hello*. He returned the greeting before turning and walking away, away from the people who chose to ridicule, to shame him. He left before I had the chance to say anything more. Those pearls were beautiful. I wanted to tell him that.

## Sermons

### I. Cardboard Resurrection

I found my Bible, buried in a box in the attic. The box labeled *Kitchenware*--seemed fitting to find it there since people, as my old Methodist preacher loved to say, couldn't live on bread alone, just on the words coming out of God's mouth. His Holy catchphrase, his Biblical slogan. Though how can people eat God's words? We eat food.

### II. Leavened Bread

The manager of McDonald's proclaimed herself a preacher, and the counter became her pulpit. Her congregation: construction workers, the elderly, anybody who tithed to receive greasy paper bags of food and a *God bless you* as their receipt. *We will live to see the Rapture*, she said, as I ordered a hamburger. *Get right with God.*

### III. Holy Clothing

*God hates us.* A phrase I never really noticed before, on the back of my shirt chosen at random out of my closet. *Why?* The man appeared beside me, an apparition of his faith, some faith, any faith. My shoulders jerked upward in dismissal, as the questions dripped from his mouth: *but why does He hate us? Do you believe? Are you a Christian?* I stared at him, eyes blank, mouth closed, before he declared me *lost* and *bound for hell*, and moved on to preach to someone else.

### IV. The Devil's Music

*Repent! The end is at hand!* red, painted letters on the side of an RV proclaimed, a moving sermon for the sinners. It was parked near the concert arena, the people inside the getting out and shoving flyers in our faces, neon pieces of paper declaring everyone *sinners* and *damned*. *We are here to save you*, one of them said to me. My sister gave the woman the finger.

## A Certain Pedagogy

Poetry used to rhyme. But English ran out of good rhymes,  
and nothing ever rhymes with *orange* or *purple*  
unless you decide to make up a word--*borange*,  
maybe *nurple*, then everyone will know you're full of shit.  
The goal of poetry, once, was to create a good cliché,  
churn out lines like *the moon hangs overhead in the sky*  
or *my dying soul seeps out of the linearity of the universe*.  
Sometimes, all I want to do is sit at the kitchen table  
with scrambled eggs littered across my plate  
and my coffee mug full, ready to scald my tongue,  
and write *blood dripping from my teeth* and *the moon*,  
*a silver orb, reflects in my eyes*. Maybe throw an onomatopoeia  
in there for good measure (*crack*) or personify a tree  
(cracking a roof). If Emily Dickinson went through  
a poetry workshop we might ask her to set her poem aside  
and write something else, and that *death kindly stopping for me*  
is a literal impossibility. Push it further, Emily. Keep at it.

## **My life is measured out in**

plastic stirring sticks and Great Value sweetener packets, buying the same brand of coffee my grandma liked: Master Chef, because it's cheaper than Folgers

the number of times I went to Barnes and Noble to buy a book from the classics section like *Dracula* or *Great Expectations*, books I thought I needed but didn't read

the number of times I have to take my dogs out and pick up their shit

episodes of Supernatural and Doctor Who, and learning to "salt the bones" and that time is "wibbly wobbly"

the queue on my Netflix, full of movies and shows I have yet to watch

times I wanted to forgive my father for leaving

times I wanted to message him on Facebook

losing weight, gaining it back, losing it again

research papers and all-nighters

notes on neon-colored Post-Its and busted ballpoint pens

doodles of cows standing in a grassy field, a smiling sun overhead, my sister says that the cow's face looks like a penis

teaching elementary school, burning out, and deciding to get a masters in English

listening to my mom yell about losing her goddamn car keys, her hat, her purse, her sunglasses

turning Christian, turning Agnostic, turning Christian (again), becoming a None

wondering if my ass looked fat in my jeans

not fitting into any of my jeans

reading *Utopia* for fun

reading Shakespeare for fun

running out of coffee and being too lazy to go to Walmart and buy more

finally going and lingering for too long in the coffee aisle

## Homebody

Wish I could unfold a road map, place it on the kitchen table, close my eyes and point to a town and go. Pack what I won in the maroon suitcase kept under my bed, throw my suitcase in the trunk of my car. Drive down back country roads lined by crabgrass overgrowth, empty red Solo cups, crumpled beer cans, old newspapers screaming out headlines in bold type that people don't care about: **Local Man Wins First Place in Tractor Pull! Fall Festival in Town Square Today!** Stop at a hole-in-the-wall to taste the *world's best pancakes* and listen to local gossip about crop growth, high taxes, the *town bastard* or the *cheating bitch*. Local gossip I'm not interested in but part of my travelogue, something to share over social media. Can't find motivation to go anywhere except places in my hometown. Comfort is not beyond city limits, it is in familiar streets lined with the same crabgrass overgrowth, the same empty red Solo cups, the same cans I saw two weeks ago, the same old newspapers. Comfort is addicting, restraining, holds me. I cling to what is safe, wad up the map, throw it away in the trash can before I have a cup of coffee and walk my dog.

## Last Mug

An empty ashtray, often the centerpiece  
of the table. A half-pack of cigarettes  
and a silver lighter sat adjacent to the Marlboro pack.

Many times, I found myself across from her  
at this kitchen table, my hands busied  
by something or another, hers occupied

by a cigarette gripped between two yellowed fingers.  
The tip glowed red with each breath in  
and tobacco perfumed each breath out

as she talked about baking apple cobblers  
and lemon meringue pie, getting up early  
to cook meals for her family during the Depression

and doing farm chores after,  
or quitting this *damn habit*.  
Now, I sit at this same kitchen table

and look toward an empty chair,  
to a sink cluttered with dishes  
from her last meal. Needed to rid myself

of those dishes. Remnants of molded baked beans  
and the smell of sour milk wafted from the sink.  
It made me want to gag.

She wouldn't need her plates  
or her collection of souvenir coffee mugs  
hidden behind cabinet doors.

I threw them away, one by one.  
Before the final cup went in the trash,  
a thought went through my mind: *should I keep it?*

The stain of generic Folgers  
clung to the inside of each handled dome,  
a stain no amount of soap could ever cut through.



## **Eulogy For My Sister's Hamster Speedy**

We gather here today to bury this hamster who died while the electrician installed new air conditioning. Something about sawdust getting into his lungs, and he escaped...held him in my hand as he died, buried him in a decorated and bedazzled shoebox. Buried one foot under, not six feet under, he's not a person and I didn't want to take the trouble to dig that far. Preacher at our church said *animals don't have souls*, so what happens to Speedy in the afterlife? Do hamsters go straight to hell since animals don't have souls, or do they get a free pass since they don't know the right way from the wrong one (dammit, you should have stayed in the cage)? Should he get a headstone? Here's a rock, write on it with a marker: *Here lies Speedy. You got out of your cage once. Mom thought you were a mouse because you crawled on her face while she was sleeping, and she swatted you against the wall.* Sorry about that. Also, sorry about the time I almost stepped on you. Enjoy running on the great big hamster wheel they probably have for you up there. Amen.

## Self Confessions (Things I Think About But Never Tell Anyone)

When I was a kid, I made a pair of construction paper wings and jumped off my swing set, fell to the ground, skinned my knees. After that, I was told I had *lofty goals*.

I have entered stores through the exit doors and waved at the cameras. Yeah, I like to live on the edge. *Hope they capture my good side.*

I have plucked out my gray hairs. I have believed the tales that they grow back in a 3 for 1 deal.

Don't pluck them out anymore, I just dye them red instead.

I tried to hatch a chicken from a refrigerated egg to keep as a pet, and still wonder why the chicken crosses the road against traffic. It's roadkill now.

I spent fifty dollars on an itchy wool sweater because it was from Abercrombie & Fitch--wore it only once.

One time I bought a Wonderbra. Very uncomfortable. That day, I learned to never trust name brands.

I like that my boobs are small. Once, I entertained the idea of getting breast implants, but I don't want the pain that surgery brings.

Sometimes, I can get away with wearing a bra, but only around the house.

I bite my nails, bad habit I haven't been able to break, no matter how much I tried to quit.

Tried to start smoking, couldn't pick up that habit. Mom told me if she ever caught me smoking, she'd kick my ass.

Dad hit me with a belt once for being a smartass--my backside bruised a mottled green and purple, my nose hit the wall and blood, the taste of pennies, trickled down into my mouth. He never did it again. Didn't stop his criticisms, though.

I'm weird, according to my married friends and various relatives, because I don't go on enough dates. *You're in your thirties. The clock is ticking.*

## Obituary

For the woman who gave me  
my first sip of wine, after I asked  
if it tasted like grape juice or Kool-Aid.

For the woman whose seventy-seven  
years of life ended up as miniscule,  
newspaper-style font.

For the woman who taught me  
never to become an alcoholic:  
*not worth the investment or time.*

For the woman who enjoyed  
crossword puzzles, yard sales,  
quilting, and a good cup of coffee.

For the woman who clipped coupons,  
bought generics, and would have  
blanched at an obituary's price.

For the woman whose obituary  
cost about two hundred dollars,  
and even in death, was frugal.

## Scattered

I wanted to keep her rose-colored urn,  
sit it on my coffee table in the midst  
of old newspapers, dirty dishes, and  
outdated magazines with smiling  
celebrities on the glossy covers.

I wanted to sit, have a cup of coffee,  
and converse with her ashes, perhaps  
stir a spoonful and mix them into  
the scalding liquid so I might taste  
the earthy dust to which she'd been reduced.

I wanted to scoop my hands into her expanse,  
sift her through my fingers, pour her out  
onto the wood and trace doodles till the tips  
of my fingers turned gray and my  
palms were coated with pulverized bones.

I wanted to sprinkle her onto the grass,  
food and fertilizer to aid in the photosynthesis  
of her cherished rosebushes and purple irises  
planted around the perimeter  
of her chain-link fence.

But I buried her in White Chapel Memorial Gardens  
on a February morning, the frozen air chilling  
the marbled urn, while the priest said his obligatory  
prayers. *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*  
I prayed they wouldn't solidify.

## Talisman

She wanted ice cream for every meal. Three scoops of vanilla, in a small bowl, a plastic spoon to eat it with. Swollen hands riddled with contusions and senile lentigos clutched the bowl--her talisman, her ancient amulet to ward off the "C" word the doctors loved to say, infinite return of diagnosis/prognosis. A casual word in everyday medical lingo, delivered as easily as the orderlies delivered tray of heated-up vegetable medley, Salisbury steak, and red Jell-O in the days before she came home to our living room and to a hospice bed. She always ate three bites before handing the bowl to me. *I'm full*. The words contradicted by a disappointed look, a longing stuffed deep behind bowled orbitals, a wanting to finish the three scoops before it melted into a puddle of liquid soup I'd rinse down the sink. Afterward, she wanted her morphine, pale blue liquid poured out in careful measure, bitter to follow the sweet, something to help her forget how three bites of ice cream made her full and how morphine never helped her sleep anyway.

### **After Einstein died**

his ashes were scattered  
by his family in secret,  
used as fertilizer to sow the dirt.  
If I took a bite of a golden delicious,  
I wonder if the molecules  
might be infused by theories  
of relativity and Brownian motion.  
Thomas Harvey, a pathologist,  
smuggled the brain out of  
Princeton Hospital in a jar,  
carved it into 240 pieces  
and stored it in glass tubes  
he kept hidden in a cider box  
in his warm Missouri basement.  
Desecration of such an organ  
is strange, but I would not mind  
holding it in my hands, the weight  
heavy, the pieces slick and viscous,  
putting it back together  
with string and superglue,  
obtaining intelligence by osmosis.

*--after Frank Giampietro*

## Church Lock-in

twenty-four hours surrounded by god paintings  
god on the walls red-faced / angry-faced  
finger pointing eyes narrowed and judging  
of ten-year-old-me memorized bible passages  
*unworthy of his love he died for you*  
for AWANA buckstraded them in  
for a bouncy ball and bubblegum spit out  
after it tasted like rubber  
at midnight we went to the YMCA  
swimming group activity escape  
another girl blond-haired and eleven  
on her period couldn't swim  
(what was a period I asked she shrugged)  
taught me how to jump off the high dive  
climbed the ladder stood on the board  
toes curled gripped the edge  
other kids watched laughed  
*who cares what they think*  
looked down at her don't remember  
her her name the color of her swimsuit  
but at that moment wasn't afraid of heights  
not because I was told *god catches you*  
*when you fall* but because she was the holy ghost  
my savior from the taunts and laughs  
a transparency no longer clear  
couldn't see the hands of god ready to catch  
could only see clear pool water smell chlorination  
pinched my nose shut jumped  
sunk down down into all nine feet  
bobbed back up coughed  
looked at her she smiled  
(*way to go try it again* jumped)  
kept jumping till we had to go  
back to church stayed up all night  
didn't speak of god no place for him here

## **Lemon Meringue Pie**

Perfect peaks of egg white toasted brown,  
yellow filling underneath, tart and sweet,  
sitting on top of homemade crust. Any time  
I asked her how to make it she smiled,  
said it was a secret, that one day she'd tell me.  
That one day turned into never, and now I stare  
at her urn, the secret of her recipe ground up  
into chunks of bone and ash.



## Churches

Why does Missouri need so many?  
They're as abundant as gas stations,  
religion on the go, picking up verses  
and sermons as easily as you can pick  
up a donut or a case of Miller Light.

On a drive to Kansas City, churches sat  
alongside the road, churches one after another,  
*you will find Jesus here* and I wonder  
if I took a detour, pulled into the parking lot  
and walked inside if I would truly find Jesus there,  
sitting in the uncomfortable pews, smoking  
a cigarette and reading the newspaper, because  
the Bible's a book he's read many times.

Tried finding Jesus once, was even baptized  
because the preacher told me I'd be new,  
that I'd find him again once I came back up.  
I was ten. I believed. It was February,  
and once it was done, I wasn't new. Still me,  
just shivering even after the organist wrapped  
a worn terrycloth towel around me.

Didn't find him again, either.  
He must really like his privacy.

## Colloquial Lemon

*So. You're from Missouruh.* The end of the word dragged out like a long syllable of seeming confusion. My salad fork, the tines decorated with bits of lettuce and cucumber, paused halfway to my mouth, and I gave a sharp nod. He nodded back, and jabbered on, *Missouruh. I've been to Branson, you know, the hillbilly Las Vegas, I saw the St. Louis Arch, and don't the weather get crazy in Missouruh?* I shoved the fork into my mouth and chewed on frustrations about people who sit beside me at lunch and ask about the place I've called home, the place where the weather can't choose between one extreme or the other, the place where I caught lightning bugs to keep in a mason jar home. *Missouree*, not *Missouruh*, I wanted to say, but the same thing would happen, the insistence on the added syllable flavored by a country twang, a colloquial lemon clinging to the edge of a glass filled with syntactical iced tea. I wondered what his reaction might be if he happened to be from *Mississippi* or *Illinois*, and if I said to him: *Mississippuh. Illinois.*

## In The Name Of

Found God while working at McDonalds,  
the manager spoke for him, a direct landline  
between the sky and the ground--  
she handed receipts and bags to customers  
while treating the counter as her pulpit,  
the receipts as messages written in  
Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek.

*He'll take all of you.*

*I know when the Rapture is.*

Didn't want it to be right now,  
hoped God would at least give me  
the chance to shower, to wash  
off the grease we baptized French fries in.

+

Found Mother Mary on a walk,  
a kitsch statue, her plastic molded body  
sat on a windowsill, arms outstretched,  
her painted eyes witnessing the dominion  
of sunburnt front yard. Should I pray  
while crossing her holy path?

*Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for  
the sinners, but most of all, pray for  
the grass. It needs watering. Amen.*

+

Found Jesus while sitting at Panera,  
he used a plastic knife to cut his sandwich  
in half, turned one sandwich into two,  
partook of his crust and skin

*eat this, this is my body*

drank water *drink this, this is my blood.*

I waited for him to turn it into wine.

It stayed clear. Jesus finished his sandwich,  
read the *Springfield News-Leader*.

Wanted to ask him for his autograph,  
but I didn't have a pen.

### **Saturn can float in a bathtub**

because it's so light, something my teacher  
mentioned once during a science lesson.  
After that, I begged my parents for a telescope.  
I sat outside in the front yard on warm  
evenings, the twenty dollar plastic cylinder  
pointed at the Missouri sky, a jump rope at the ready,  
the cord knotted in a temporary lasso.  
The planet may have been comfortable  
in its sixth-place position but I'd find it,  
rope it around the ellipse of helium gases,  
pull it down to Earth and to my front yard, try to fit it  
through my front door. Mom would say  
*Nice to meet you, Saturn, but mind the rings.*  
*I spent all day cleaning the house.*

## Flurry

*So tired of this goddamn snow*  
my neighbor yelled outside my window,  
the scrape of shovel against concrete  
an orchestral cacophony of fork against plate,  
a consistent and regular sound.

\*

Laura Ingalls made candy out of snow  
and maple syrup, squiggles and lines drawn  
over frozen crystals packed into the bottom  
of an iron skillet. Mom never let me, didn't want me  
eating yellow snow. But snow cones are made of snow!

\*

Rowdy has to take a piss, runs outside,  
rushes head first into a drift. White powder  
clings to his nose and chin, he looks like Scarface  
smelling his contraband. Comes back inside,  
flops down on the floor, licks his balls.

\*

A bird died when the snowstorm hit.  
I found it under the lone backyard tree  
after the snow melted. A curious specimen,  
wings frozen in macabre snow angel pose,  
mangled. No wonder my dog's breath  
smelled like a rotting carcass.

\*

Least this time the storm's not as bad  
as Snowmageddon, when we went nine days  
without power, lived on McDonald's, Taco Bell,  
and KFC, showered at our health club and slept  
at a hotel. God, that fast food tasted *so* good...

\*

Robert Frost spoke of stopping by some patch of woods  
on a snowy evening but all I want to do is stay inside,  
look out the window, laugh as my neighbor keeps falling down.

## Even Stitches

She surrounded herself with scraps  
of fabric: uneven squares of calico  
gathered from boxes, ragged strips  
of muslin prints that had fallen out of  
plastic bags. Her wrinkled hands  
chose pieces at random--stripes,  
miniature tulips, polka dots. Each piece  
had a purpose, a part, and in between  
her selections, she told me her mother  
showed her the patterns, the various fabrics,  
the right way to thread and hold the needle.  
She never needed a thimble, for the pads  
of her fingers grew thickened and roughened  
by years of shucking corn, canning fruit,  
milking cows. *These pieces will tell a story*,  
she told me, her voice proud as she pulled down  
the old patterns from her shelves, patterns  
made on a farm in Richland, Missouri:  
Cherokee Rose, Little Dutch Girl, Flower Basket.  
I loved watching her trim the colored material  
into even shapes, loved watching her graft  
those shapes together with the practiced ease  
time provided. She tried to teach me how to quilt,  
how to tell my own stories, but my hands proved  
too large, my fingers too clumsy. I never  
found myself able to hold the needle  
the same way, and the end of the thread  
frayed every time I poked it through the eye.  
I use many of the quilts she made me,  
and the ones I don't are packed away  
in her old cedar chest. Every once in a while  
I open it, gather the blankets she made in my arms.  
The smells of cedar and cigarette smoke linger still.

## The Healthian Prophet

*You should really become a vegetarian*  
she blurted out from behind me  
as I stood in line waiting for a sandwich artist  
to make my roast beef and chicken on wheat.  
Five dollar foot long, eat fresh.

I turned around, listened politely as she described  
how cows suffered in their final bellowing moments  
of bovine life, how chicken's brains  
were scrambled into a gooey, snot-colored mess,  
how this *massacre* lowered a chicken's I.Q.

But I wonder if chickens even possess intelligence?  
I've never had a conversation with one  
or figured out how to speak Chicken,  
never visited their coop, their hangout,  
to ask them about their innermost thoughts.

All chickens do is cluck and peck  
at the ground, and shit out eggs that hatch  
or get boxed up in a cardboard commune  
with eleven others to learn  
the many ways of being cooked.

I interrupted, told her I had read an article  
about how bananas might go extinct  
in ten years, and that it is a cruelty  
to peel the skin from the soft, mushy fruit,  
and maybe people should stop eating bananas.

She stomped out of Subway, and I ordered  
my sandwich with extra lettuce. About  
as vegetarian as I would go.

## Powerball

*Today is the day*, Mom grins, after tucking the slip of paper in her worn jeans pocket: random numbers on it-- five white, one red. *Today is the day we hit it big*. I play along, pretending to be serious and that we'll do great things with the money once we win. We wouldn't be like the ex-con from Kentucky who won forty-one million and spent twelve million of it in one year. We wouldn't spend it all on Ferraris and cocaine, just on paying bills and going on vacation cruises. When she doesn't win, she tells me I should buy the tickets, pick the numbers because *I'm lucky*. All I've ever won in my life is fifty dollars, free movie tickets, and hair care products at Project Graduation. I don't consider this lucky, and I don't think she'll ever win the lottery. But we pretend, and she keeps digging up quarters, enough to get the two dollars to buy a ticket, enough to be disappointed again when the numbers don't match.



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